

MEMORANDUM

TO: Members of the House Education Committee

FROM: Nick Ciaramitaro, Director of Legislation and Public Policy
Michigan AFSCME Council 25

RE: Senate Bill 618

DATE: November 29, 2011

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. For the record, my name is Nick Ciaramitaro and I am Director of Legislation and Public Policy for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees in Michigan. Michigan AFSCME Council 25 represents over 55,000 workers who make everything from our roads to our universities happen in Michigan including over 10,000 non-instructional school employees.

Our members, in addition to being custodians, clerical workers, bus drivers, food service workers and more in the schools are also parents. As such we continue to be concerned about the quality of education in our school system as our public schools – including public school academies struggle to meet the needs of students in these challenging times. We are, of course, concerned about the fiscal challenges facing our schools as a result of state budget decisions. And we are concerned about the mixed messages being sent on the issue of school consolidation and charter expansion. As you know, charter schools are the opposite of school consolidation in that each creates a new school district duplicating administrative costs. If that results in better quality it is, of course worthwhile. But recent studies indicate that is not the case.

Though there are high quality charter schools, there are also failing charter schools and the percentage of each does not appear to be significantly different between charters and traditional schools. Charter schools, schools of choice, along with the general concept of competition in schools does not appear to be the quick answer that many hoped that it would be.

Draining financial resources from traditional public schools to set up duplicative administrative services in charter schools should not be extended unchecked. We, therefore, oppose the unlimited expansion of charter schools called for in SB 618. I have distributed a copy of an article which shares that concern. Please note that the report from Lou Glazer of The Center of Michigan comes from a traditional champion of charter schools.

We agree that allowing some combination of charter schools under one administrative body makes sense but again caution that this should be closely monitored. We are greatly concerned that, while Michigan law requires the closure of failed charter schools, nothing prohibits management companies running those failed schools from reopening under a different name.

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Unlimited charters: not smart

By [Lou Glazer](#) • on September 23, 2011

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From their inception in the Nineties Michigan Future, Inc. has been an enthusiastic supporter of charter schools and public school choice. Still are. We have been involved in helping create charter schools for more than a decade. But our support is tempered by the reality of student performance in charter schools. It is mixed at best.

The ideological rhetoric is that traditional public schools with elected school boards, strong unions and big centralized bureaucracies face permanent gale force winds that make it almost impossible to deliver effective teaching and learning leading to high student achievement. And that freed from all those evils plus having parents and students choose their school, charters will get far better student achievement. And that university authorizers, not having local elected schools boards, will police quality far better so only high quality charters will be allowed to operate long term. Sounds great in theory, but the reality is much different.

Detroit is where the state's charters are most concentrated. Both in the city and in the inner ring suburbs where it is easy to attract students living in the city. Add to that, according to most pundits, policy makers and business leaders here and nationally that DPS is the worst school district in the country, you can't have an easier environment for charters to demonstrate their superiority.

But they haven't. Not even close. Excellent Schools Detroit (ESD) has developed a [report card](#) that ranks schools on student achievement. It includes schools in and out of the city where at least 40% of the elementary and middle school students and 30% of high school students are Detroiters. ESD then hosted a series of shoppers fairs to highlight high performing schools for Detroit parents. To be invited to the fair elementary and middle schools had to have at least 75% of their students rated as proficient on both the MEAP reading and math tests. For high schools it was 16.5 on the ACT. Both standards are quite low.

How did the charters do? Not great to say the least. Of 59 charter elementary schools, only 8 met the standard to be invited to the shoppers fairs. For middle schools only 5 out of 48. And for high schools only 3 out of 22. Most embarrassing for charters is that there were more DPS schools that met the standard at each level than charters: 12 elementary schools, 7 middle schools and 4 high schools.

DPS's reputation as an awful school district is well deserved. That they can operate more higher performing schools at all grade levels than the more than 100 charters with large numbers of Detroit students is not evidence that they are a better district than their reputation, but that charters by and large do not deserve their reputation as delivering high student achievement. Some do, most don't.

That experience leads one to believe that eliminating the cap on charter schools as has been proposed in Lansing will almost certainly lead to the creation of far more low performing than high performing new schools. Not a good way to raise student achievement. A better idea, that we proposed nearly a decade ago, is to give authorizers the ability to earn the right to exceed the cap based on the student achievement of the schools they authorize. The better their students do, the more schools they can authorize.